

Julius Civilis: the enemy within

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Rebel yell

Rebels who operate on the margins of society have often been portrayed throughout history in romanticised terms: think of the benign Robin Hood, robbing the rich to help the poor, or of generations of Hollywood cowboys. Roman culture too could at times characterise rebels in idealised terms, provided that the troublemakers had not inflicted excessive damage before conveniently going to their graves, reassuringly crushed by the mighty Roman war machine. Tacitus' *Agricola*, for example, gives a long, poignant and highly implausible speech to an otherwise unknown Scottish chieftain called Calgacus, as he confronts the prospect of losing out heavily to the Romans at the battle of Mons Graupius (somewhere near Aberdeen). Calgacus' speech portrays grasping, oppressive Romans, opposed to feisty, freedom-loving Britons. His speech culminates in a provocative set of alternatives, which are all the more remarkable when one considers that they were formulated by a Roman author:

Here there is a general and an army; there, payments of tribute, mine-working and the other punishments of those in slavery, which, depending on this battle, we can endure forever or avenge at once.

On the one hand, Calgacus' words raise fundamental questions about the nature of Roman imperialism (as discussed in Dominic Rathbone's piece on Roman Britain in *Omnibus* 44). At the same time, though, for a Roman reader they generate a grudging respect for the speaker, who is prepared to risk his life for his ideals.

Civilis' war

Still, Tacitus could afford to be generous, since his father-in-law *Agricola* would defeat Calgacus in battle. Not all rebels were treated so positively by the Roman historical tradition. One such figure is Julius Civilis, the leader of an opportunistic rebellion of a German tribe, the Batavians, in A.D. 69-70. His revolt came hot on the heels of the devastating civil wars in A.D. 69, which we call the year of the four emperors. Our most extensive account of Civilis' activities is to be found in books 4 and 5 of Tacitus' *Histories*, but as we will see, he had an extensive after-life as an emotive national hero in Dutch culture and imagination.

Perhaps the most galling aspect of Civilis' rebellion for the Romans was that he kicked them when they were down. What is more, he used deception to disguise his rebellious activities until his efforts had gained sufficient momentum. Moreover, Civilis was not simply some resentful barbarian struggling to keep his people free (even if he was keen to portray himself as such), but he had actually gained Roman citizenship and was serving as a leader of an auxiliary unit in the Roman army. For Civilis to institute a nationalist revolt just when the Romans were at their most vulnerable was certainly no way to repay the trust that had been placed in him. Both the timing and the location of the revolt, with the powerful German tribes so close, meant that it had the potential to be extremely dangerous. Tacitus' presentation of Civilis is therefore very different from his more positive characterisation of Calgacus. Civilis (whose very name is so suggestive of a civil conflict), is characterised as a clever chameleon, who can play up his barbarian or Roman identity depending on the circumstances:

Yet Civilis was endowed with cunning to a much greater extent than barbarians usually are, and although declaring himself to be another Sertorius or Hannibal because of a similar disfigurement of his face, he alleged friendship with Vespasian and enthusiasm for the cause, fearing that if he openly rebelled against the Roman people, an attack might be made on him as an enemy...

In this description, Civilis plays a role designed to fool everybody. Is he a friend or an enemy? Roman or German? We have no clue as to how he lost his eye, but he is certainly cunning enough to exploit this facial disfigurement for dramatic effect, suggesting links with some troublesome figures from Roman history. The Carthaginian leader Hannibal came as close as anyone to crippling the Roman state, particularly at the battle of Cannae in 216 B.C., where he defeated both consuls and their armies; and the Roman general Sertorius led a concerted resistance against the dictator Sulla in Spain, where he gained widespread support by adopting native clothing and speaking the local language. In a particularly elegant touch, Tacitus reinforces Civilis' own evocation of Sertorius with a literary allusion of his own: the phrase 'disfigurement of his body' is borrowed from a passage about Sertorius from the *Histories* of Sallust.

The enemy within

The disturbing thing about Civilis from a Roman perspective, as Tacitus makes clear, is that he is both an enemy from within, trained in Roman fighting techniques and knowledgeable about their vulnerabilities, as well as an outsider, a Batavian nobleman who could draw on his heritage as a non-Roman to stir collective feelings against an imperial power. Tacitus signals in advance the murky nature of this conflict by calling it 'simultaneously a civil and foreign war'. Certain moments allow Tacitus to dramatise the dual nature of the war especially vividly. For example, after the surrendered Roman soldiers from the legionary camp at Vetera have been treacherously massacred by the Germans,

Civilis, according to a barbarian oath taken after the war against the Romans had been started, had his wild and reddened hair cut off, now that the slaughter of the legions had at last been achieved.

Civilis' haircut recalls a rite of passage described in another work by Tacitus (*Germany*) in connection with a German tribe, the Chatti, whereby the men only cut their hair once they have killed an enemy. German onlookers would therefore have been able to read the powerful significance of Civilis' haircut, although the context of the vow is at the same time suggestive of the Batavian general's devious nature. The slaughter of the Roman legionaries – which takes place not in pitched battle but after their surrender – is hardly the primitive ritual of manhood described by Tacitus in the *Germany*. Civilis is playing the barbarian for his own political reasons, and the rules of the game in this instance are hardly fair.

I have concentrated on two strategies used by the treacherous Civilis to exploit his native heritage to maximum effect: his manipulation of his scar and of the hair-cutting ritual. In many ways, these examples typify Tacitus' sophisticated and double-edged treatment of the whole rebellion. Civilis emerges as a very

different creature from the noble rebel leader Calgacus of the *Agricola*: rather than a loser whom we can afford to feel sorry for, the Batavian general Civilis is a persistent danger precisely because he is so difficult to place. And indeed from one perspective, Civilis can be seen (not just in name) as the perfect emblem of the Roman civil wars Tacitus describes, where brother is turned against brother, and deception, treachery and pretence dominate proceedings at every turn. In civil war, you can never be clear about the lines between friend and enemy.

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<http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/mythen/english/niederl.html>